DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 890 JC 800 396

AUTHOR McCullough, K. Owen
TITLE Are We Committed to Change Through Citizen Participation?
PUB DATE [70]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Agents; *Citizen Participation; *Community Change; Community Development; *Community Leaders

ABSTRACT

Two major concerns of American life are searching for community and determining the extent to which the citizenry of a community ought to be involved in the decision-making process. While they may disagree on how much citizen participation is desirable, almost every scholar of urban life believes that citizen participation is a good and viable goal. There are, however, several practical questions and issues involved in attaining it. First, the initial start of citizen participation will require an elite vanguard and will necessarily be undemocratic. Second, the leaders of the group or groups that will be affected by a political decision must be determined. Third, community leadership may not be apparent until a crisis situation develops. Fourth, time and effort must be expended to achieve quality participation and one must ask, how much time and effort people are willing to spend. Fifth, there is a point when participation may become mere meddling and insincere. Not only must the advocate of citizen participation be aware of these considerations when attempting to induce change, he or she must be sensitive to the interplay of elements and processes within each social system and must be aware that participation involves the rights to effective speech, to be wrong, to be different, to influence decision-making, to contribute, to consume with dignity, and to a continuing share in society's burdens and decisions. (AYC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED203890

ARE WE COMMITTED TO CHANGE THROUGH CITIZEN PARTICIPATION?

by

K. Owen McCullough
Assistant Professor
of
Continuing and Higher Education

JC 800 396

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Owen McCullough

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

An assertion that several recent studies make is that one of the leading themes in American life since the Civil War has been the so-called search for community,[1] not a geographic search, but a sociological search, one that perceives the individual as an interacting organism within a complex, interdependent society and takes account of the external pressures which act upon him as he interacts. From Jefferson to Robert Park, to Burgess, Hunter, Dahl, et al., the concept of community has commanded the attention of increasingly larger number of scholars, seemingly in direct proportion to the growth of today's urban phenomena, from the town, to the city, to the metropolis, to the megalopolis.

Along with this concern, this search for community, has come also an increased concern for determining the extent to which the citizenry of a community ought to be involved in making or participating in the decision-making process. Most every scholar of urban life believes that citizen participation is good, but they disagree as to the extent of the participation. On the one extreme is the

---

[1]Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order, 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); R. Jackson Wilson, In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920 (New York: Wiley, 1968); The Search for Community in Modern America, ed. E. Digby Baltzell (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

Stanley Buder also has recently interpreted the work of Ebenezer Howard, the originator of the modern garden city idea, as being within the framework of the search for community in, "Ebenezer Howard: the Genesis of a Town Planning Movement," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35 (Nov., 1969), 390-98. "One of twentieth century man's most important and elusive quests," according to Buder, "is his search for community in an increasingly mobile, impersonal, and bureaucratic world" (p. 396).

ineptitude and inefficiency in the process of laymen trying to make technical decisions, while on the other extreme is the pure democratist who sees evil in what he considers the dictatorship of the technocrat, and only good in an abstract called "the will of the people."

Somewhere between these two extremes, depending upon the decisions to be made, most social psychologists and urban sociologists can be found. The question, therefore, of whether there is to be citizen participation is irrelevant. There is no real issue on this point. The issue, indeed, the overriding issue involves how much participation, whether the problem involves pollution control, urban renewal, garbage collection, public transportation, public utilities, tax assessment, building codes, zoning, or any one of a host of other problems. When Robert Park observed that cities are full of human "junk," for example, he was not attacking the city as a heartless aggregate of individuals. He was merely emphasizing the point that due to the social chaos created by giving lip service to the philosophy of citizen participation and, at the same time, failing to come to grips with its inherent complex problems, "the... thing... which we still know least is the business of carrying on an associated existence,"[2] thereby dooming whole segments of urban populations to the anonymity of the ghetto and the democracy of the cemetery.

---

[2]Robert E. Park, "Community Organization and Juvenile Delinquency," The City, eds. Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, Robert D. McKenzie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925-67), p. 109.

Assuming, then, that at least in theory citizenship participation is a good and viable goal, what are some practical problems or issues involved with attaining it? First of all, the initial start will have to be undemocratic. "Regardless of the point in the evolution of a program... it is always possible to point to an earlier point at which [there was no involvement], and from that it is easy to charge that the entire undertaking is tainted with... Original Sin.... There is the necessity to start somewhere.... Whoever takes the initiative is in some sense acting unilaterally, even when he acts to consult others."[3] When Marx said "Workers of the world unite...," he was unwittingly refuting his own claim that the proletariat would rise up leaderless and tear down the structure of capitalism. To his death Marx failed to grasp, as Lenin eventually did, the necessity of an elite vanguard to move the masses forward.

The degree to which such a vanguard is necessary depends upon the decision to be made. The first real problem, then, in the process of creating citizen participation, is trying to determine who the leaders are of the group or groups which can or will be affected by a decision. For example, suppose a local bus company is trying to determine the best possible routes in the ghetto area of a city. Since ghetto residents are the target population, ghetto bus riders ought to be included in the planning.

---

[3]Edgar S. and Jean Camper Cahn, "Citizen Participation," Citizen Participation in Urban Development, Volume I, ed. Hans B.C. Spiegel, (NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1968), p. 211.

This is a slow and costly process, as indeed democracy is, but it is less costly than arbitrarily determining bus routes and schedules at a downtown office with only company officials present. By involving the riders, the bus company will improve its public image and, at the same time, increase the efficiency of its operation. By failing to involve them, it will have failed to benefit from the "consumer prospective," and likely lose money on its routes, thus further lowering its public image, increasing vandalism and robberies, and eventually forcing it to ask for rate increases, increases which will only heighten public wrath and prove to be counter productive. (Witness the demise of the Coast Cities Transit Company of Dade County, Florida, in the late 1950's.)

Sometimes, however, leaders are more difficult to find. They are not so readily apparent except when crisis situations develop. This is very true today of black populations whose leadership is fluid and has gone into the streets, away from the ministers and teachers whose historic function was to serve as the linkage between blacks and whites. In this case, it is probably better to do as Saul Alinsky did, to wait and recruit only "'when we hear of a guy who is mad and organizing on his own... [then] ask "'"What kind of anger is it? Is it a neurotic anger that could be cleared up by eliminating some personal cause? Or is it an anger of injustice that will stay with him? Then... see whether he will take advice, whether he has a passion for anonymity, and

whether he wants to learn."'"[4] Presumably, Saul Alinsky, the absolutist, taught the fellow whatever he must know!

Another key problem in citizen participation has to do with determining the autonomy of the system to be changed. A vertical organization with higher levels of authority must be changed by external factors. Local political policies, for example, must sometimes be changed at the state level. But an organization with no outside restrictions must be changed from within. This is not to say that public pressure has no affect on it. It simply means that changes in an autonomous organization must be made from within the organization by the members.

A further problem has to do with the amount of time and effort people are willing to expend in order to get quality participation. As was noted earlier, democracy is expensive, at least initially. It costs money to have meetings, arrange public forums and referendums, and develop publicity. It takes time to educate, and it takes patience. It is so much easier, though so much less productive in the long run, to simply ramrod a program through. The swiftest and most ignorant change is dictated from the top. When it fails, just as the Edsel did, all one has to say is, "The public wasn't ready for it." Ironically, it is also true.

Still another problem or issue concerned with citizen participation comes in determining the point at which participation has become mere meddling and insincere. Just because people are asked to participate does not mean that they will sincerely

---

[4]Stephen C. Rose, "Saul Alinsky and His Critics," Citizen Participation in Urban Development, p. 164.

try their best to be effective participants. Too many people wish to be nominated to citizens' committees for the sheer prestige of the nomination. They become, then, the rubber stamp of the chairman who uses their apathy to propel himself into even greater positions of power. Unfortunately, it is not rare to find what appears to be a widely representative committee actually controlled by an active, vociferous minority. (Witness the ward system politics of Cook County, Illinois, for example.)

In considering the problems to be overcome when trying to increase the opportunities of citizens to participate in decisions affecting their lives, one is left with the uneasy but understandable feeling that planned interventive measures used to induce community change through citizen participation, though generalizable to the study of community development, is not a formula for success in every specific instance. It is good to know what to consider when trying to induce change, but it is far more important to be sensitive to the interplay of elements and processes within each social system, since each is a unique entity. And while one is developing that sensitivity, it is also good to reconsider what the Cahns call their "Seven Dimensions of Participation," and, at the same time, remember that for each of these positively stated "Dimensions," as listed below, there is also the implied right <u>not</u> to exercise the right, as well as the right to exercise it whenever one wishes.

Seven Dimensions of Participation

1. The right of effective speech
2. The right to be wrong
3. The right to be different
4. The right to influence decision making
5. The right to contribute
6. The right to consume--with dignity
7. The right to a continuing share in their society's burdens and benefits.[5]

Citizen participation is good, yes, because it is effective and beneficial once it has been developed. But it can also be wearisome and fraught with peril. (What does one do when citizens decide to dump raw sewage in the ocean rather than raise their taxes to build a modern sewage treatment plant, after they have had the opportunity to attend numerous public forums concerned with the dangers of water pollution? Witness the city of North Miami in 1966.). No, the advocate of citizen participation must neither be weak nor timid. He must be prepared to lose battles, even though he may eventually win wars.

---

[5]Edgar S. and Jean Camper Cahn, p. 224.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGES
96 POWELL LIBRARY BUILDING
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90024

AUG 21 1981